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Apocalyptic Imaginaries, Gramsci, and the Last Man on Earth

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Spatial imaginaries of the apocalypse are as commonplace as ever. Whereas many geographers have critiqued them as politically disabling and categorized them with the rise of postpolitical discourse, others have argued that they are potentially generative of new, progressive forms of politics. In this article I contribute to this discussion through a Gramscian reading of the apocalyptic imaginary of “the last man on Earth” as encapsulated in the novel *I Am Legend* (Matheson [1954] 1995) and its three filmic adaptations, *The Last Man on Earth* (Ragona and Salkow 1964), *The Omega Man* (Sagal 1971), and *I Am Legend* (Lawrence 2007). Gramsci is useful here for his analytical method of situating political expression within the historical structure that enables and constrains it. Likewise, how the end of the world is imagined is not strictly something that politicizes or depoliticizes, but can also be seen as an effect of the established social order. I argue that this can be discerned both in terms of how the book and films are situated historically, and in terms of how they portray violent civilizational upheaval as a function of its own past. The meaning of the term *legend*, and its dialectical relationship with the conjunctural moment of the apocalypse changes drastically across all four iterations of the narrative. **Key Words:** apocalypse, Gramsci, *I Am Legend*, postpolitics.

Debates about apocalyptic imaginaries in geography and cognate disciplines take a number of forms, perhaps reflecting the variety of ways the world has been imagined to end (e.g., religious, environmental, economic causes).¹ In part these debates concern whether narratives of the apocalypse engender a progressive or regressive politics. What makes the reality of that so complex is that how narratives (be they textual, filmic, performed, etc.) are produced and interpreted is highly relational, with creators, viewers, and the medium itself mutually engaged in a spatial event in which geographies are imagined (Hones 2011). Besides a literary spatiality, narratives take on their intelligibility with reference to the nonfictional world, and thus have a complicated relationship with it (Saunders 2010; Ginn 2015). Literature and film reflect, and potentially reinscribe, the particular historical conditions that make their intelligibility possible (Aiken and Dixon 2006). Critically mapping the relationship between art and historical condition is part of how we might assess the political utility of apocalyptic narratives. With that in mind, in this article I analyze the novel *I Am Legend* by Matheson ([1954] 1995) in relation to its three filmic adaptations, *The Last Man on Earth* (Ragona and Salkow 1964), *The Omega Man* (Sagal 1971), and *I Am Legend* (Lawrence 2007), with a particular eye on the morphing portrayal of monsters and myth across a half-century time span.

I refer to monsters and myth because how monsters are articulated as a form of myth—existing by definition outside of society proper but exerting cultural power within it—can tell us something about how power is encoded spatially.² Geographers have typically approached this topic through an analysis of the cultural or political fears monsters represent (e.g., Saunders 2012). May (2010), for example, accomplished this by analyzing zombie films in terms of how urban space is produced through a self–other dialectic. In his analysis of H. P. Lovecraft’s horror fiction, Kneale (2006) suggested a different sort of dialectic—that of individual agency and historical structure. He argued that horror haunts us because it reminds us that figures from the past, now ghosts, perhaps have more collective impact on the built structure that conditions our lives than we can in the here and now. In this article I do not follow Kneale theoretically, but I do follow his methodological focus on the historical conditioning of the present as demonstrated in horror fiction. I chose the various adaptations of *I Am Legend* because the optic they revolve around—the last man on Earth waging war against a horde of semiorganized vampires—illustrates a dialectic of the past, in the form of myth, and the present, in the form of science. In the European Enlightenment, the monster as myth came to be the constitutive outside of science (Dixon and Ruddick 2011), a historical ghost that made possible the notion of rationality and reason. The crucial observation of the last man on Earth narrative is that this understanding of myth, which is found in the original novel, changes radically across the three adaptations. As the meaning of myth changes, the manner in which history is inflected in its own end game—the apocalypse—also changes. This has inherently political implications.

This focus on the historical conditioning of present politics is why Gramsci’s (1971, 2012) theoretical insights can bear productive weight on geographies of literature and film. One broad point of distinction in film geographies is between those that separate ontologically the “real” from the “reel” and those that do not (Cresswell and Dixon 2002).³ The former sees film as a representation of reality, albeit with important coconstructive power relations between real and reel, whereas the latter sees film as an enactment as worthy of study as landscape, place, and so on. Bunnell (2004) provided an empirically rich example of how the film *Entrapment* operated both as a representation of its context (Kuala Lumpur) and an enactment with important consequences for Malaysian internal politics. Carter and McCormack (2006) located the ideological work of film in the particular affects they produce, which constrain how people interpret world events.⁴ As elucidated later, Gramsci contributes to this conversation by recognizing art as reflective of the material preconditions of its possibility, as well as a site where those material conditions can be challenged and reshaped. He characterized art in a manner similar to Power and Crampton’s (2005) characterization (citing Stuart Hall) of the geopolitical function of film as a battleground of representation. As Gramsci (2012) argued (in the context of literature), “the heroes of popular literature are separated from their ‘literary’ origin and acquire the validity of historical figures” (350).

The other reason Gramsci’s (1971, 2012) work is useful here is that it helps position the last man on Earth imaginary within debates about the political implications of apocalypse. Although I am skeptical of the political utility of any totalizing discourse, I would also say that to ask whether apocalyptic imaginaries are enabling or disabling is to presume an answer existing in the abstract. Gramsci instead insisted on historically situated analyses that conceptualize something like politics as fundamentally dynamic, changing along with the material and structural base from which it is articulated. Thus a Gramscian approach to this question should endorse something akin to the “living philology” called for by Loftus (2014, 232). In this case, such an

approach involves not only placing the book and films in their historical context, but also analyzing them in relation to each other, changing the question from what apocalyptic imaginaries do to what form their political gestures have actually taken over time. I elaborate on this idea in the following section, before turning more directly to the narratives of apocalypse themselves.

APOCALYPSE AND THE POLITICAL

Critiques of apocalyptic narratives range from those who see them as potentially “revelatory” to those who see them as a “closing down” of political space (Skrimshire 2010b, 5). Strauss (2015) and Ginn (2015) provided excellent recent examples of the former perspective in geography. Strauss argued that like utopias, dystopic narratives are often analyzed either in terms of the difference and otherness they reflect, or as a form of “social dreaming.” She argued in favor of the latter (in reference to the literature of Barbara Kingsolver and Margaret Atwood) because within the space of interaction among authors, text, and readers exist “fictionable worlds” (Noxolo and Prezioso 2013) still up for negotiation. As textual events, then, apocalyptic imaginaries are potentially sites in which the politically possible is constituted in the first place. Ginn argued much the same about filmic events, analyzing the 2011 film *The Turin Horse* (Tarr 2011) as an example of how dystopic futures can help reframe what sort of politics we consider possible.

Both Strauss’s and Ginn’s work contrasts a larger body of literature in geography highlighting the “politically disabling” (Katz 1994, 276) aspects of apocalyptic narratives. Perhaps the most prominent voice in critique of environmental apocalypse in geography has been Swyngedouw (2010, 2013), who considers apocalypse to be part of a growing trend toward postpolitical discourse. The concept of postpolitics hinges on a crucial distinction between politics and the political, the former of which is derivative of the latter. In contrast to foundationalist scholars (e.g., Schmitt) who search for an essential political moment from which a formal politics is said to spring, critics of postpolitics typically assert some version of a void or gap as the essential core of the political (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014). Žižek (2008), for example, situated the political within Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, arguing that between political subjects and objects exists the Lacanian Real, with no two individuals making sense of that Real via the same Symbolic order. There is thus no essential political moment, only an inevitable social antagonism as combatants seek to meaningfully arrange what appears as chaotic. Politics, then, is the superficial façade of individualism and choice in representation that obscures real political struggle. For example, Žižek critiqued a now commonplace liberal multiculturalism as obscuring class politics (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014).⁵ Žižek (2011) argued that “the form of universal rights, equality, freedom, and democracy is just a necessary, but illusory expression of its concrete social content, the universe of exploitation and class domination” (44). He then argued that it “has a power of its own . . . to set in motion the process of the re-articulation of actual socio-economic relations” (44). A shallow focus on identity politics, in other words, is post-political because it reinscribes the material order that gave rise to it.

For critics like Swyngedouw, environmental apocalypse is postpolitical because it elevates a “we’re all in this together” mentality over one that recognizes hazard as part of the uneven development produced by the process of capitalism in the first place. For this reason, “sustaining

and nurturing apocalyptic imageries are an integral and vital part of the new cultural politics of capitalism” (Swyngedouw 2013, 12). Here Swyngedouw emphasized postpolitics as a process of political formation wherein political struggles are subjugated by neoliberal politics, rather than an unqualified condition of twenty-first century capitalism. I bring this up because if postpolitics described a specific contemporary condition, as opposed to a process, then McCarthy’s (2013) critique that postpolitics is nothing new and that it is politically vacuous because it represents a totalizing discourse while claiming to critique totalizing discourses would carry more weight. In that case he would be right to refer to postpolitics as about as meaningful of a term as globalization. For the sake of this article, however, I am going to interpret postpolitics as congruent with the depoliticization that is integral to a neoliberal process that deserves critique just as neoliberalism does. It might not be new, and it might be resisted at the grassroots level as Lerner (2014) argued, but given my purposes in this article it makes more sense to ask how depoliticization works through modern narratives of apocalypse, if it does at all (and I think it does). Thus, I mostly refer to depoliticization rather than postpolitics from here forward.

I believe a Gramscian reading of apocalyptic imaginaries as ethico-political moments can help illustrate the role they have played in processes of depoliticization. Ethico-political moments for Gramsci reflect the historical constitution of hegemony at any particular point in time, and he analogizes them as “in history what the moment of ‘form’ is in art; it is the ‘lyricism’ of history, the ‘catharsis’ of history” (Gramsci 2012, 104). As Hart (2013) argued,⁶ Gramsci recognized the economic foundation of social order, but rather than thinking in terms of the subject interpellated by that order (in an Althusserian sense), posits the person who actively participates in the political sphere. This distinction turns out to be crucial to Gramsci’s reading of Marxist historical materialism as dialectical rather than causative. For Gramsci, ethico-politics are part of the superstructural battle for control of the economic base. Also in contrast to Althusser, Gramsci saw science and philosophical inquiry as part of (rather than separate from) this superstructural battle in which all persons participate. Supposedly orthodox readings of Marx were guilty of projecting their own speculative notions of the political onto the base-superstructure model that, Gramsci argued, Marx never intended (Thomas 2011). Rather, Gramsci (1988) argued (in a preprison writing) that

With Marx, history continues to be the domain of ideas, of spirit, of the conscious activity of single or associated individuals. But ideas, spirit, take on substance, lose their arbitrariness, they are no longer fictitious religious or sociological abstractions. Their substance is in the economy, in practical activity, in the systems and relations of production and exchange. ... An idea becomes real not because it is logically in conformity with pure truth ... but because it finds in economic reality its justification, the instrument with which it can be carried out. (37)

Political ideology, therefore, is not caused by material structure, but is enabled and constrained by it. Along with science and philosophy, it takes the form of art, literature, and folklore; as Gramsci (1971) argued, “‘popular beliefs’ and similar ideas are themselves material forces” (165). Gramsci’s point is to historicize this conjunctural interplay between the ideational and material; as Thomas (2009) argued, doing so can help transcend the speculative notions of the political implicit in both foundational and postfoundational analyses of the political.

Therein lies the first of two crucial observations Gramsci’s thought can add to an analysis of the last man on Earth as an apocalyptic imaginary. In his *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci (1971) famously argued that everybody is an intellectual in the sense that everybody

has a particular conception of the world. The difference between those recognized as an intellectual and those not recognized as such is that dominant classes can create professions, disciplines, and the like in conjunction with, and in service to, their particular conceptions of the world. There are thus no nonintellectuals, only those whose conceptions of the world are not serviced by the hegemonic order. When one class's conception of the world becomes world-shaping, however, the hegemonic order could shift. Gramsci (1971) also stated that "the superstructures of civil society are like the trench systems of modern warfare" (235; although later he conceded important differences; this is merely a metaphor). Narratives of the apocalypse would, in Gramsci's formulation, fall into either the category of art or folklore (understood as written or artistic expression of myth), but either way would reflect the superstructural battleground on which conceptions of the world become hegemonic. Gramsci (2012) argued that art embodies ethico-political history, as art is produced by the artist who is both socially and historically conditioned in the same way as the intellectual. The same can be said about the viewer. Gramsci (2012, 189) further argued that folklore is a "conception of the world and of life" that opposes the "official" conception (i.e., of the state, capital, or the Catholic Church). As a few more examples, he further argued that the social function of utopias is to criticize one's state with a foreign society as a proxy, and characterized the emergence of the serial novel as a form of daydreaming wherein the proletariat avenges their grievances against the bourgeoisie.

Any of this could fall well within the preceding discussion of the political efficacy of apocalypse. The problem is that although the person actively participates in the political sphere, his or her conceptions of the world have certain conditions of possibility (Loftus 2014). What legitimated the artist and the intellectual was, after all, a historically conditioned economic, material, and professional base outside of their control. This means that the author, text, and reader might well actively participate within the space of the textual event, but such an analysis exists at a level of abstraction not particularly helpful in critically understanding the political implications of apocalyptic imaginaries. This leads to the second of Gramsci's observations that bears weight on this discussion—that a radical historicism is needed to understand any particular moment of hegemony. Loftus (2014) interjected Gramsci into the postpolitics debate by arguing that theorists of postpolitics (in particular Chantal Mouffe) engage in a speculative reading of the political that is ahistorical. He argued that to define "the political" in the abstract is to say that it is definable a priori, whereas Gramsci would be more interested in how the political is constituted at any particular conjunctural moment of history.

Loftus's understanding of Gramsci's thoughts on the matter is broadly congruent with my own reading of Gramsci's (1971) "Brief Notes on Machiavelli's Politics." Gramsci countered interpretations of *The Prince* (mostly by his contemporary Croce) that Machiavelli was attempting to distill a scientific principle of how collective will concretized in the form of the state. In contrast, Gramsci read *The Prince* as a combination of political science and political ideology in mythic form. He argued that the prince was neither a real person nor even a figurehead of the state, but more like Sorel's notion of myth, which is a nonutopian expression of the collective consciousness of a people. This is still not a science of how consciousness expresses itself politically, however. That there becomes a prince is not the issue; that the form it takes is a function of how particular conceptions of the world are enabled or constrained by social structures (as with artists and intellectuals) throughout history is. For instance, Gramsci identified the political party as the form of this mythical prince, whereas for Sorel it was the general strike. Gramsci then argued that the prince can only take the form of an actual person in the

event of a sudden calamity or disaster, in which case the prince-as-myth would be ephemeral, not standing the test of time because it would not express collective will.

This ephemeral version of the prince in the face of calamity can be read as a depoliticized version of myth, as it reflects desperation rather than social antagonism, although obviously Gramsci was not attempting to contribute to any such debate on postpolitics. This reading of Gramsci does suggest, though, that depoliticization should be understood as a historically situated process. Likewise, whether apocalyptic imaginaries could challenge the dominant order, or will by their very nature totalize and thus obscure real political struggle might just be an incomplete question. If apocalyptic imaginaries can be understood as ethico-political moments, it might be more important to understand what form they have actually taken and in what way they articulate the economic base that is still at the center of Gramsci's notion of hegemony ("for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic" [Gramsci 1971, 161]). That is why I address the issue through a close reading of the evolving form of one particular imaginary—that of the last man on Earth in a death struggle against a vampire horde.

LAST MAN ON EARTH: DISCUSSION

Richard Matheson's 1954 novella *I Am Legend* is a classic work of American gothic fiction, and although it involves vampires it is often credited as seminal to the later rise of apocalyptic zombie fiction. It is similar to the ensuing films mostly in the general context in which the protagonist, Robert Neville, finds himself. In the book, Neville is a Los Angeles factory worker who loses his wife (Virginia) and daughter (Kathy) to a vicious plague that wipes out humanity in the mid-1970s. The plague is spread by enormous dust storms triggered by vaguely referenced "bombings." At the outset of the story, Neville has fortified his suburban home to keep out vampires—the "undead" whose bodies are reanimated by the very germ that has destroyed humanity. The vampires, including his previous friend Ben Cortman, surround his house nightly, implore him to come out, throw rocks, and sometimes cannibalize each other, while the women pull up their dresses in an attempt to lure Neville from his house. They fail to enter because of the garlic, crosses, and mirrors with which Neville has guarded his house. During the day Neville sharpens stakes, fashions garlic necklaces, collects supplies, and searches for vampires to kill, particularly Cortman. Many of the vampires he dispatches are in fact not undead but are still very much alive, suffering from infection of the vampire germ and restricted to a coma-like state during the daytime. Neville calculates that they will eventually die, turn into "undead" vampires, and kill him if he does not act first. Much of the story is a conflict between both forms of vampire (living but infected and the "true," undead vampire) and Neville.

The spatiality of this apocalyptic imaginary has been analyzed in numerous ways. The image of the lone, sentient survivor defending his last scrap of autonomous territory from the undead masses has frequently been seen in terms of the subject–ant subject duality in various forms (e.g., Kneale 2006; Lauro and Embry 2008; May 2010). More specifically, *I Am Legend* has been analyzed in terms of particular anxieties about sexuality (Khader 2013) and race (Patterson 2005). There is at least some evidence of the latter, as early in the narrative Neville provides a drunken monologue in which he imagines giving his preapocalypse friends a speech about how the vampire question is similar to the "minority question," and that the essence of vampirism can be found throughout society in other forms. To the extent that all of these interpretations layer

the narrative on some form of social difference they all oppose Clasen's (2010) claim that *I Am Legend* is persistently frightening to audiences because of the human evolutionary desire for collective security; Clasen's is a totalizing and postpolitical interpretation if there ever was one. Even readings of *I Am Legend* focused on its expression of social difference—the "minority question"—could potentially show a depoliticizing imaginary, at least if one subscribes to Žižek's view of the postpolitical.

Bowring's (2015) analysis of *I Am Legend* is particularly insightful for moving beyond the simple metaphors for social difference that are obvious in the book and movies. She pointed out that the book comes out of the gothic tradition, for which the control of historical narrative (or lack thereof) was always a paramount issue. In the novel, Neville reads *Dracula* and mocks its superstitious element, such as vampires turning into bats, while studying biology and bacteriology texts to get to the root of the vampire disease. He has difficulty reconciling the scientifically explainable aspects of vampire behavior, such as being repelled by garlic or dying in the sunlight, with those aspects seemingly rooted in folklore, such as fear of crosses and mirrors (neither of which had any real effect). So although analyses of *I Am Legend* as expressive of anxieties about social difference are valuable in the sense that they describe the social context in which readers make sense of them, Bowring was still right to suggest that the self–other dialectic most present in the novel is between science as enlightened rationality on one hand, and myth as the constitutive "other" of scientific enquiry on the other. As Neville begins to solve the scientific puzzle, he realizes that the vampires surrounding his house were an effect of the same bacteria that caused vampire outbreaks of the past, mythologized in gothic novels like *Dracula*, but now concluding that "the vampire was real. It was only that his story had never been told" (Matheson [1954] 1995, 77). In other words, previous generations of vampire had failed to control their own narrative, and thus were relegated to "legend" status. Modern science failed to prevent the twentieth-century vampire outbreak because it could not believe in the existence of the vampire (Neville quotes Van Helsing in *Dracula* to this effect), and by the time it did, "the legend had swallowed science and everything" (Matheson [1954] 1995, 17). Neville is eventually fooled by a female, living vampire (Ruth) who poses as an uninfected human, and is consequently captured by a fledgling society of living vampires who are constructing a new, nocturnal civilization. Neville is set for execution for having previously dispatched so many living vampires, and as he peers from his jail cell onto the throngs of vampires eagerly awaiting his death, he realizes that "he was black terror and anathema to be destroyed. . . . A new terror born in death, a new superstition entering the unassailable fortress of forever. I am legend" (Matheson [1954] 1995, 159). Bowring pointed out that Neville becoming legend refers to a science–myth dialectic, in which Neville ceases to represent science and becomes myth for a revolutionary society.

In the closing pages Ruth explains to Neville that his execution is inevitable because the vampire society was "like a revolutionary group—repossessing society by violence" (Matheson [1954] 1995, 155). This violent overthrow of the dominant order was historically informed in several ways. Through much of *I Am Legend*, Neville chastises himself for thinking too much about his own past and for feeling sexually attracted to the vampires, both of which interfere with his scientific progress. This represents the spatial equivalent of the tension between science and myth persistently represented in the novel. After discovering why garlic and sunlight harm the vampire germ, he sets as his task discovering why mirrors and crosses repel them, a task he characterizes as potentially "slipping on the banana skins of mysticism" (49). Science eventually

provides the reconciliation he is searching for, as his pursuit of psychology leads him to the conclusion that gothic myths of vampires were ingrained deeply enough into the psyches of those who became infected that they retained these irrational fears even into their posthuman state. For Neville the conflict is resolved, and he no longer mourns the death of his family or has any sex drive.

In terms of the apocalyptic imaginary this novel reflects, though, Neville represents the brutal, war-like society that is being overthrown by an underclass—a vampire society for which history is still very important. People became vampires because of a series of bombings that unleashed a previously constrained bacteria, but their actions in vampirehood are driven by myth—the way they think they are supposed to behave as commonly expressed in folklore. (One vampire leaped to his death from a light post, flapping his arms because he thought he was a bat. Only the infected but not yet vampires, like Ruth, understood that crosses have no effect.) Prior vampire outbreaks were relegated to the status of folklore, and the failure to acknowledge the reality of the vampire of the past was a significant aspect of why science fails to contain the plague this time around. Myth thus returns from the past to overthrow the hegemonic order (Neville) and establish a new society. The pronouncement of the neo-scientist Neville that “I am legend” in the end indicates that he then becomes myth for the new vampire society, not for the human race.

In terms of a Gramscian analysis of apocalyptic imaginaries, however, we must see how this science–myth dialectic changes form in filmic adaptations in 1964, 1971, and 2007. *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), directed by Ubaldo Ragona and Sidney Salkow, was the first adaptation, and until the final sequence of the film it follows the novel remarkably closely. Robert Neville is now called Robert Morgan and is played by Vincent Price. Rather than a factory worker turned pseudo-scientist, Morgan is a scientist working in a lab to stop the vampire disease as it spreads. His new symbolic position as a state-sanctioned scientist working in the field of chemical warfare indicates the movie’s early Cold War context. In a flashback to the days leading up to the apocalypse, Morgan is in the lab discussing the germ with fellow scientist Ben Cortman, who, as in the novel, later stalks his house nightly as a vampire. Cortman is a junior scientist who argues that rumors of vampire activity should be taken seriously as a possible explanation. Morgan responds to the effect that vampires are not real, only the germ on the microscope in front of him is real. Although the film’s plot is far simpler than that of the novel, the relation of science to myth is familiar; Morgan’s official scientific knowledge is blind to myth, which leads to the violent return of myth in the form of vampires (which move like zombies in the film). As opposed to the novel, he manages to “cure” Ruth (played by Franca Bettoia), but not before she can save him from the fledgling society of living vampires who want to avenge the deaths of their loved ones. They chase him to the steps of a church where they gun him down. As Bowring (2015) pointed out, the only hint of a reversal of self and other in the final scenes is Morgan’s realization that “they were afraid of me” to Ruth, indicating that in his final moments he saw himself as the aggressor and the vampires as capable of fear. Nevertheless, the film does not end with an “I am legend” moment—Morgan does not take on “a monster status imbued with its own form of social power” (Bowring 2015, 139) for a new civilization of vampires. Rather, the closing dialogue has Morgan calling the vampires “freaks” and “mutations” and himself “a man, the last man.” Thus what was previously a nuanced tale of science–myth dialects as historically conditioning the possibilities of social revolution is reduced to one of identity politics by its first adaptation, perhaps playing on racial anxieties of the 1960s. This is particularly clear given that Morgan is a white, middle-aged, suburban family man who dies on the steps of a church.

The identity politics are even more obvious in Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man* (1971), due partially to the public controversy it created over an interracial kiss. Robert Morgan is Robert Neville again, and is played by Charlton Heston. The setting has moved from Los Angeles to New York City, and Neville is not only a scientist but an Army doctor. The undead vampires have taken the form of "The Family," and rather than the bumbling zombie-like creatures of *The Last Man on Earth*, they are organized and highly articulate. They are only briefly referenced as vampires, and although they have pale skin and eyes and die in the sunlight, they do not suck blood, fear garlic, and so on. In this version, however, they do have a clear political ideology, that of a radical antimodernism in which all forms of machinery (even the use of guns to kill Neville) are forsaken. They are led by a demagogue named Mathias (played by Anthony Zerbe) who refers to Neville as "that thing, that creature of the wheel, lord of the infernal engines, the machines," and later as "the last of the scientists, the bankers, the businessmen, the users of the wheel."

Their antimodern, anticapitalist ideology is also connected to an identity politics that is spatially coded in the film. Rather than the suburban home of Robert Morgan, Neville lives in a large house in Manhattan with a lighted balcony overlooking a fountain. The focal point is the balcony, from which Neville shoots at The Family and toward which The Family attempts to penetrate Neville's fortress. This vertical spatialization of state-science and antimodern myth is described by Mathias as he laments Neville "living high in the light while we rot and hide like scrubs." One of Mathias's soldiers, an African American, refers to Neville's compound as a "honky paradise," to which Mathias responds, "Forget the old ways brother, all your hatred, all your pains, forget." Members of The Family regularly state "the family is one," and chant "There is nothing outside the family." They view preapocalypse racial division as a reflection of an original sin in which humans moved from simple tools to machines, electricity, and capitalistic institutions—it is thus both a mystical and historically materialist ideology. This is expressed clearly when Neville is captured and put on trial for murder; Mathias and Neville exchange barbs, with Mathias calling Neville the "angel of death" and Neville replying that The Family are "barbarians." Before Neville's execution, Mathias describes how The Family seeks to regain its control of historical narrative: "We will simply erase history from the time machinery and weapons threatened more than they offered. And when you die, the last of the living reminder of Hell will be gone." They seek to erase social hierarchies by turning back the clock on the material history that produced it.

An entirely different conception of the world, and of the constitution of the conjunctural moment of the apocalypse, is presented by the human survivors who rescue Neville in the nick of time. They are Lisa (played by Rosalind Cash), who replaces Ruth, and Dutch (played by Paul Koslo), who is not found in the other versions. Lisa and Dutch take Neville to a hilltop encampment where they and a number of children are hiding from The Family. They are infected with the vampire germ, but have not yet turned into vampires. After comparing notes and running more experiments back at Neville's compound, they discover that Neville's blood contains a serum that can be used to cure the disease. Overjoyed at the prospect of escaping the city, Dutch remarks that "we're starting over again, just like the Garden of Eden, only we don't trust no snake." Here is another Judeo-Christian reference to original sin, except that in Dutch's conception of the world the apocalypse is a function of individual greed, not a historically situated material order. The snake refers to the machine-breaking, antimodern luddites who attempt to pull the plug on

social hierarchy. That this is a conflict of political ideology is made clearer as the vertical spatialization of the lighted balcony and street level is reversed near the end of the film. After a number of action sequences, Mathias is able to capture the balcony and hurl a spear at Neville below, striking him in the chest and mortally wounding him (his death in the fountain also resembles crucifixion). The subaltern has usurped the hegemonic order, but not before Neville is able to give the serum to Dutch, who escapes with Lisa and the children to the hills.

The Omega Man can be further analyzed in terms of a couple of different levels of abstraction: its depoliticizing liberal multiculturalism, and how it imagines apocalypse through a science–myth dialectic differently than the novel and *The Last Man on Earth*. First, the movie is ostensibly about interracial harmony. In the beginning Neville visits a theater and watches a Woodstock documentary, to which he has several lines about social acceptance memorized. He also engages in an interracial romance with Lisa, who is black and from Harlem. In contrast, The Family is depicted as intolerant, burns art, wears hoods, and distinguishes Neville from themselves by his lack of “marks,” which refer to their white, blank eyes. It is debatable whether the multiculturalism of the film depoliticizes class relations, à la Žižek, or vilifies them. One does not need to dig deep to see the contrasting ideologies: Neville and the other survivors are apolitical good guys who situate original sin in the Garden of Eden, whereas The Family emphasizes the historical inflection of socioeconomic inequality and situates original sin in capitalism and the reliance on machines that reproduce its logic. Furthermore, by distancing The Family from vampires as generally recognized (they do not lust for blood, fear mirrors or garlic, etc.), their evil is removed from their biology, as it is in the previous version, and located in their politics. The depoliticizing message of the film seems to be that an accepting, Woodstock-esque society would be possible if not for those snakes from the Garden of Eden who keep bringing up the past and refuse to obey the power structure. In fact it is easy to read The Family as a proxy for the Black Panther Party, although as Bowring (2015) pointed out it could also represent social fears of cults in the wake of the Manson trial. The film’s multicultural appeal thus potentially rearticulates class relations (Žižek 2011) through a conservative class warfare argument.

Invoking an implicit class warfare argument is not by definition depoliticizing. I argue, however, that it is depoliticizing when looked at in terms of the form of the science–myth dialectic across the various iterations of *I Am Legend*. The most significant difference between *The Omega Man* and *The Last Man on Earth* is that the revolution of the subaltern class is lost. As pointed out by Bowring (2015), in *The Omega Man* there is not even a hint of reversal of self and other, as for the first time *legend* comes to mean a legendary figure in the survival of the human race, not the myth outside of science that becomes folklore for a new vampire civilization. Whereas the plot twist at the end of *I Am Legend* is that the living vampires are shown to be sentient, organized beings—in fact human beings—and this element is reduced to a few lines in *The Last Man on Earth*, it is virtually absent in *The Omega Man*. Furthermore, in the first two versions of the story, the manner in which the apocalypse is historically informed is a persistent theme, as discussed earlier. This aspect exists in *The Omega Man* only in The Family, which is unequivocally villainous; the only character who is remotely sympathetic to them is a boy named Ritchie, who is then killed by The Family. It is not only the radical politics of The Family that is quashed, it is the very foregrounding of history in political struggles. The meaning of legend is no longer even dialectical; when Neville is crucified and manages to pass on the serum, his legend becomes that of a symbolic figurehead, the creator of a new Garden of Eden. To be legend in this apocalyptic imaginary has been thoroughly dehistoricized, and thus depoliticized.

Finally, what is true of *The Omega Man* is generally true of the blockbuster film *I Am Legend*, directed by Francis Lawrence (2007). The major exception is that The Family is absent, replaced by “dark seekers” who are the least recognizably human of all the versions. They are not, in fact, even referred to as vampires anywhere in the film, and consequently the entire science–myth dialectic characteristic of the original novel is lost. The dark seekers are shown by the end of the film to be capable of a degree of collective behavior, and depending on how one interprets the final sequences perhaps empathy toward each other, but for the most part the historically informed politics represented by The Family has been erased. The transition from *The Omega Man* to *I Am Legend* illustrates a transition from a radical politics as present but vilified, to a radical politics nowhere to be found, and replaced by religious overtones not present in any of the previous versions. Ruth and Lisa have been replaced by Anna (played by Alice Braga), who saves Neville (played by Will Smith) from near death at the hands of the dark seekers, and they retreat to his Manhattan compound. The only philosophical tension in the film is between Anna’s belief in signs from God, and Neville’s atheism and pursuit of science; the notion of the apocalypse or social revolution as a historically informed conjunctural moment has been replaced by questions of faith. Even the original cause of the vampire germ has been depoliticized, as it was a consequence of nuclear war in the first three versions and a failed attempt to cure cancer with a bioengineered virus in the last film (invoking a “should humans play God” theme early on).

The final sequences of the film have Anna, Neville, and a boy named Ethan trapped in Neville’s basement laboratory, with ultraviolet dark seekers closing in on them. In the nick of time Neville “reads the signs” and realizes his own destiny (more mysticism). He draws a sample of his blood to give to Anna, hides her and Ethan in a safe not big enough for all three of them, and charges the dark seekers with a hand grenade, committing suicide. The end of the film depicts Anna and Ethan pulling up to the gates of a fortified compound of human survivors in New England. The gates open and she enters, handing the vile of Neville’s blood to those who greet her. The message that in his blood was the secret to curing the disease was made clear in Anna’s voice-over in the closing scenes: “Dr. Robert Neville dedicated his life to the discovery of a cure and the restoration of humanity. On September 9th, 2012 at approximately 8:49 p.m., he discovered that cure. And at 8:52, he gave his life to defend it. We are his legacy. This is his legend. Light up the darkness.”

Once again, in concert with *The Omega Man* but in contrast to the novel *I Am Legend* and *The Last Man on Earth*, “his legend” is that his scientific expertise saves the human race, not that his death becomes a legend for an entirely new society. Christie (2011, 68) made a similar observation, but attributed the difference to how the 2007 film gets the meaning of the story “completely wrong.” Certainly adapting a narrative from book to film and across multiple generations will lead to variation, but I would argue that this is mostly not an accident. Marxists from Gramsci (1971, 2012) to Lukács (1962) have argued that literature and other forms of art have material preconditions for their expression, and hence reflect how the past has conditioned the present. Harvey (1989) famously analyzed the film *Bladerunner* (Scott 1982) for how it reflected the dominant cultural logic of capitalism (postmodernism). Likewise, the film *I Am Legend* lacks an obvious multiculturalism because there is no class politics for it to vilify. Neville and Anna are again of different races (black and Hispanic), but there is no romance between them to create a public stir. Neville listens to Bob Marley and touts his message of peace to Anna, but it comes across as incidental character building, not the obvious juxtaposition of liberal multiculturalism and intolerant class warriors found in *The Omega Man*.

I am not arguing that this reflects a now-tolerant society, but rather that it reflects a neoliberal era in which the class politics it works to obscure had largely already been obscured by 2007 (in U.S. audiences, at least). To return to Gramsci, whether a cultural expression such as art and folklore was depoliticizing or not could only be understood in terms of its historical situation. *The Omega Man* comes on the heels of the 1960s antiwar (the vampire germ results from nuclear war between China and Russia), environmental, black empowerment, and civil rights movements. *I Am Legend* came just before the 2008 financial crash and in the midst of the rise of evangelical politics in the United States, which can help explain why a tale of class warfare was replaced by a tale of an all-inclusive faith combining with science as the savior of the human race (because unlike *The Family*, the dark seekers are dubiously human).

The fact that it is the human race for whom Neville becomes a legend is perhaps the most depoliticizing development in the entire evolution of the narrative. In the novel and the first adaptation, the dominant society is replaced by a subaltern one whose story had been suppressed by state-sponsored science, and it is this science–myth dialectic that comes to inform the conjunctural moment of the apocalypse. As the constitutive outside of the new vampire society, the legend that Robert Neville or Robert Morgan becomes is more like Machiavelli’s prince as read by Gramsci. That is, it expresses the collective, revolutionary tactics of the subaltern class, a mythical equivalent of the political party for Gramsci or the general strike for Sorel. As Gramsci argued, the role of folklore was to contrast state-sponsored conceptions of the world in the superstructural battlefield. In contrast, any dialectical tension in *The Omega Man* only serves to vilify class politics. By the time we see *I Am Legend* in 2007), Neville’s “legend” becomes a singular figurehead for surviving humans, more like the human form of the prince that is only possible in the face of a great disaster. Rather than reflecting collective will, Neville came to reflect an apolitical divine intervention.

CONCLUSION

To ask whether apocalyptic narratives depoliticize or not is to assume that politics is an effect of representation, as meaning is made within the spatial event of the narrative. This is not untrue, and is even endorsed by Gramsci’s notions of organic intellectuals and conceptions of the world. It is only true, however, on a level of abstraction not deep enough to render depoliticization as a political process. For as Gramsci also maintained, those conceptions of the world, as with art and folklore, need to be sanctioned by the dominant structure to be effective; they do not simply make politics, they are enabled and constrained historically by politics (broadly speaking). That is why Gramsci read Machiavelli’s prince not as a proof of the inevitability of the state, but quite the opposite: that the particular form the collective will of the people took depended on its structural position in society in a given time period. Gramsci was mostly talking about the inability of the Italian subaltern class to resist fascism, but the same can be said of apocalyptic imaginaries. Do they do things politically? On some level, perhaps, but they also can be seen as the product of an ongoing process of depoliticization that serves the established structure. My interest here was to illustrate this through the various iterations of “the last man on Earth” in the 1954 novel *I Am Legend* and its three adaptations in film. Its apocalyptic imaginary began as a potentially progressive or revelatory narrative, but over the fifty-three years of its adaptation took on a depoliticizing role as it began to portray a totalizing version of the apocalypse.

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NOTES

1. See Dittmer and Sturm (2010) and Skrimshire (2010a) for good reviews.
2. What is meant by *myth* in this article is elaborated later. In short, however, myth, particularly in its form as monster, is understood psychoanalytically as part of what Lacan called the Symbolic, which was a subjective arrangement of an otherwise chaotic Real to make sense of the world. As *other*, it is therefore part and parcel of the antagonism inherent to political struggle (Žižek 2008). In Gramsci's (1971) terms, myth is akin to the Machiavellian Prince, which manifests in Gramsci's opinion as the political party. They differ only in the form of what they take as the other, but are otherwise compatible because they still rely on an inclusion–exclusion logic.
3. In practice, of course, there is much gray area between these camps. Broadly speaking Jameson's (1992) work can be positioned at the former end of the spectrum, and Doel and Clarke's (2007) at the latter end.
4. Lukinbeal and Zimmerman (2006) also highlighted the productive effects of film.
5. Khader (2013) made this point in regard to *I Am Legend*, but it is somewhat tangential to his overall analysis.
6. As have many others; see Robinson (2005) and Ekers et al. (2013), for example.

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